

Fourth conference quietly unfolds in Boston

By Jeff Hitchcock

There was some confusion about the title. Sometimes called the 4th ANNUAL conference and other times the 4th NATIONAL conference, in reality it was neither annual nor was it national. Regardless, the 4th conference on whiteness in Boston a few weeks ago continued the series set in motion by the Center in November 1996.

Between eighty and ninety people gathered first in historic Faneuil Hall and later on the campus of Simmons College for a process designed to encourage dialogue on whiteness. The conference had been delayed several months beyond its originally scheduled November 1999 date, but the delay had been worthwhile. The conference planners had time to arrange facilities and logistics and the process ran smoothly through the entire weekend. True, one promised room at Sproat Hall failed to make itself available, but the adjustment to tighter quarters was not a great burden. Space, food, sound system, and schedule went

together well.

Roughly five out of six participants were from Massachusetts and the conference had a distinctly local flavor that was in some measure intentional. The planners focused on Boston as an example of whiteness in operation, noting that persons from afar might draw lessons from Boston's experience.

In a conference designed to foster dialogue and sharing of ideas, each person must decide the success of the process for himself or herself. One person may find it opens new insights. Another may find it less worthy. My own expectations were not demanding. I was simply looking for a haven in which I might talk with people about whiteness without having to explain myself over and over. Sure, there might be conflict. Whiteness is hardly a safe topic. Most times it's a struggle just to get the topic on the table.

The conference stayed on focus and I got what I came for. The opening talk by Byron Rushing touched on history, a favorite topic of mine, and put the development of European American culture in the multiracial context that is uniquely American. Set in "ancient and honorable" Faneuil Hall, we sat surrounded by over 100 portraits of white men, hanging high on the wall next to the ceiling in a chronology spanning over 200 years. Not a white woman nor a person of color of any gender was to be found among them.

From there we departed in small groups on guided tours of Boston. My group's guide proved very knowledgeable, able to explain

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Center's board meets next week

On August 8 the Board of Directors of the Center for the Study of White American Culture, Inc. will hold its annual meeting.

It's short notice for members, but if you would like to bring something to our attention, please contact Jeff Hitchcock (see contact information this page, to the right)

Getting the word out

We received a call from the *Southwest Journal* of Minneapolis asking our advice on a series they were doing concerning positive developments in race relations. On the international front, a reporter from *NRC Handelsblad*, the national Dutch paper, called concerning a story on white studies. And recently the Associated Press called for background on the Fourth Conference on Whiteness.

Some members may recall that a reporter from the *Detroit Free Press* was doing a story on white identity a few months ago. She has apparently run into a brick wall in the form of her editors (more than one, it seems), who are afraid that printing the story will alienate their white readership. At last report she was considering offering the story to another publication.



White American Culture, Inc.

The *Membership Newsletter* is a publication of the Center for the Study of White American Culture, Inc. sent exclusively to its members 4 times per year. The Center for the Study of White American Culture is a multiracial organization whose mission is to define and examine white United States culture and to address its role in, and impact on, the greater American culture.

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Survey on white culture offers picture from Center's membership

By Dr. Judith Katz and Dr. Charley Flint, with Shifay Cheung

In August 1999 the Board of Directors of the Center commissioned a survey of our members. The survey had two parts. First, we wanted to hear how you would define White United States culture. Second, we believed it was important for us to know the ethnic, racial, gender and age composition of our membership. These details assisted the interpretation of the survey findings and also help us to understand the nature of our membership support.

Survey Details

Twenty-eight people returned their survey, eight were men, one of who identified himself as a gay male, and twenty were women. Members were asked to identify their race, ethnicity and age, and these are summarized below and in the table.

Men	Age	Race	Ethnicity	% of survey sample	Women	Age	Race	Ethnicity	% of survey sample
0	20s				3	20s (youngest 23 yrs)	White/ Caucasian	White Anglo-Saxon Euro/US	11%
5	30s (youngest 33yrs)	White/ Caucasian	2 None 2 Canadian 2 Anglo-Saxon	18%	1	30s	White	Jewish	3.5%
1	40s	White	Anglo- Appalachian	3.5%	4	40s	1 Black 3 White/ Caucasian	Nigerian-American 2 Anglo/Euro 1 European	14%
0	50s				11	50s	10 White/ Caucasian 1 White/US	1 Anglo-Saxon 7 Euro/White/US 1 Euro/Native US 2 Jewish	39%
1	60s	White/ Caucasian	Anglo/Northern European	3.5%	1	60s (67 yrs)	White/ Caucasian	European/US/ Jewish	3.5%
1	70s (70 yrs)	White/ Caucasian	White	3.5%	0	70s			

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Race

- Eighteen women and 8 men classified themselves as White/Caucasian (93% of survey sample.)
- One woman classified herself as White/Native American (3.5% of survey sample.)
- One woman classified herself as Black (3.5 % of survey sample.)

Ethnicity

- Two women and three men described their ethnicity as White or None (18% of survey sample.)
- One man did not classify his ethnicity (3.5% of survey sample.)
- Two women and one man described themselves as of Anglo-Saxon descent i.e. English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish (11% of survey sample.)
- Nine women and one man described themselves as of Anglo/Western or Northern European, White/Northern European, European only or European/American descents (36% of survey sample.) The cultures of origin consisted of Irish, English, Scottish, Welsh, German, Swiss, French, Dutch, Swedish and Cherokee.
- Two women described their ethnicity as European/Native American (7% of survey sample.)
- Three women described themselves as a combination of European, Jewish and American (11% of survey sample.)
- Two men described themselves as 3rd –5th Generation Canadian (one of Anglo/US descent (7% of survey sample.)
- One woman described herself as Nigerian-American (3.5% of survey sample.)

What is White US Culture? A comprehensible definition?

Some of you who responded spent a long time thinking through your answer. Other members had some immediate thoughts about the issue. Your responses were highly charged, emotional and powerful, and showed the complexity of the issue. For example, one person said, "This is a powerful exercise and I am still working on it. Addressing this question requires time for reflection and processing

and change." Another person said, "This is an extremely perplexing question, lost in the confusion of how I define my roots, family culture, etc and how I think mainstream thought, norms and media define white US culture..." A few of you referred to specific literature and authors and these are listed below under "References." It is important to note that there are no "correct" answers to the survey question.

We have summarized your thinking under common themes (details below) which emerged from an analysis of your comments As this is a summary report please know it does not include all of what was said.

History/Roots/Background

White United States culture is Western European in origins and based on the experiences of white European immigrants who came to America. Yet it has evolved into something very different from European cultures. Some of the distinctive features of White US culture evolved in the "new world." White American culture has proven to be highly assimilative of other cultures, incorporating people from other European cultures into its definition of "white" and appropriating elements of non-European cultures into its repertoire of white cultural practices. At the same time, white American culture has policed its boundaries and defined "blackness" as forever not white. This bipolar, good-bad, black-white, them-us, way of thinking is itself an element of white American culture and the underpinning foundation on which the racial structure of American society has been erected. White American culture is the dominant culture in the United States and, as such, often refers to itself simply as "American."

Socio-Political Framework

White US culture is a racially based culture though it pretends to universality. "White" and "race" are socially constructed terms, originating in colonial days, that have been used to divide and conquer. Whiteness is employed as a means to identify a particular group membership status by which a person is given societal power and privilege. Whiteness does not exist except within a system and culture of white supremacy, where a white person is deemed to be of a higher status and a person of color of a lower status. The normal or default assumption within white US culture gives credibility, worth and status to men

with white skin. However, most white American people would not acknowledge this as such but rather regard themselves as "just people."

Non-whites are judged on how well they assimilate into white US culture, e.g. speaking standard unaccented English and generally conforming to white, middle-class expectations.

Power and Privileges

Power and "invisible" privileges are the key things, which bind all "whites" together from white supremacists to anti-racists. White US culture is defined and driven by the largely unexamined assumption that the power, privileges, tastes and attitudes shaped by the dominant upper and middle-income Americans of European ancestry are normal and superior. Status and power in white US culture is measured by economic possessions (goods, space, property) and positions. Greed and competition prevail along with a belief that white US culture is better than other systems.

Being white means that you have entitlement to fair treatment, access to opportunities and having your basic needs met. Being white is also not having to realize that these entitlements are actually privileges and that many Americans do not benefit from them. White people spend little or no time thinking about whether or not they are privileged. All they know is that their culture is the norm and they have no interest in knowing anything different.

An interesting point for debate, which was highlighted, was: "Does a poor, elderly, white, mentally-disabled female have more privilege than a rich, young, black, mentally-able male?"

Thinking

White US culture promotes individualism or individualistic thinking, i.e. objective, rational and linear. The individual is the primary unit and valued above the community. There is a belief that individuals can control their environment and nature is to be tamed and conquered.

The key words and phrases people used to describe this aspect of white US culture were "winning is everything," "arrogant," "chauvinistic," "paranoid," "narrow-minded," "short-sighted" and "competitive."

Values

Strong values are part of White US culture, such as the Protestant work ethic which implies that working hard brings success. The culture is rooted in the belief in Christianity with no tolerance for deviation from the single God concept. Holidays are based on Christian religion, white history and male leaders.

A patriarchal structure with the man as the breadwinner and head of the family and the woman as the homemaker and subordinate to the husband is presented as the idealized norm, and the nuclear family is seen as the ideal social unit, in spite of numerous statistics to contradict these ideals.

The aesthetics of White US culture are the ideals of beauty, which for women is based on blonde, blue-eyed, thin and young, and for men on athletic ability, power and economic status, and of music and art based on European cultures.

Although a strong espoused set of values, these continue to be used in ways that oppress others (e.g. whites believe hard work equals success, which supports the opinion that people of color are oppressed because they do not work hard, versus seeing the impact of real discrimination and racism in our systems on the lives of people of color.)

Redress/Rebalance/Future

Some people put forward suggestions to redress the inequities inherent in the system. Where a person is in some state of consciousness about the privileges that come with being born white, they should work to minimize the inequities, e.g. to take political responsibility as citizens of "democratic" nations and hold governments accountable for actions in view of international law. There is a core within white, US culture of a sense of "fair play" and "justice" and this needs to be nurtured.

We should not condemn all "whites," as there were abolitionists, Quakers, various journalists, even some pioneers and settlers who lived peacefully and respectfully with non-whites. We should continue their legacy of challenge, advocacy and action. There also needs to be a willingness to extend into the place of pain where people of color live, so that understanding takes place. Many whites need to forgive themselves for what the slave masters did and ensure that their behaviors are not repeated.

See **Results**, page 6

References

A few people referred to the following references:

1. Table 7.2 "The Components of White Culture: Values and Beliefs" from *The Counseling Psychologist* (p. 618) by J. H. Katz, 1985, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage. Copyright 1985 by Sage Publications, Inc.
2. Table 6.1 "Cultural Value Preferences of Middle-Class White Americans and Ethnic Minorities: A Comparative Summary" from *Family Therapy with Ethnic Minorities* (p232) by M. K. Ho, 1987, Newbury Park, CA: Sage. Copyright 1987 by Sage Publications.
3. Thandeka, *Learning to Be White* (1999).
4. A good description of the details of white culture (body language, table manners etc) is given in a book called *Live for Success* written by John Molloy. He is also the author of *Dress for Success*.
5. Also see MA Thesis entitled "*Unveiling whiteness to articulation.*" Reference suggested by Karen Chandler
6. Also see James Baldwin's notion, "*that white is whatever cuts off our sense of connection to ourselves, each other, the earth. To become white means to disconnect from community and the truths we are born knowing.*"

Conclusion

It is critical for all of us to undertake this activity of defining White US culture. By exploring this question we continue to acknowledge the issues, which continue to dominate our society. The outcome is to make explicit the implicit nature of White Culture and see it as a force that is fostering and maintaining racism in our organization, society, community and lives.

exactly how race had shaped the neighborhood we visited. As a non-Bostonian, I felt overwhelmed by the details. At the end of the day we reassembled in discussion groups according to our personal interests.

Saturday involved small group discussion using the Council Process. Confidentiality prevents me from disclosing details, but our group stayed on topic in a way I found meaningful. The process lent itself to a thoughtful dialogue. Our group of sixteen contained two white men, four women of color, and twelve white women. This breakdown seemed typical of the conference. A few men of color were present as well, but none appeared in my group.

Saturday night was given to more lighthearted activities as discussion groups from the previous day put on skits, and the evening finished with a round of singing and moving about the room.

Sunday brought workshops using an open space format. Some participants offered to lead on various topics and others chose to attend those discussions that caught their interest. In the early afternoon the conference ended quietly with everyone given a chance to speak. It was here that it became clear many participants had been very moved by the process. Several spoke with feeling of what the conference had meant.

About a half-dozen members of the Center itself were in attendance and it was a welcome opportunity for me to meet and talk with some of our supporters. Congratulations are due to all the conference sponsors, but in particular to Meck Groot of the Women's Theological Center and Paul Marcus of Community Change, Inc. Meck and Paul, and their respective organizations, have been key sponsors since the second conference and though the details were not visible to us at a distance in New Jersey, I expect they carried a large share of the burden of planning the fourth conference. To them and their fellow planners, thank you for a worthy event.